

 **Brygida Gasztold**

Koszalin University of Technology

Environmental Neocolonialism and the Quest for Social Justice in Imbolo Mbue’s *How Beautiful We Were*

ABSTRACT

The article addresses the problems of environmental degradation, as illustrated and explored in Imbolo Mbue’s recent novel *How Beautiful We Were* (2021), which juxtaposes the fictional oil company Pexton’s corporate greed with the push for rapid economic growth in a less developed world. Intrusions into the fictional African country’s sovereignty are manifested by foreign capital’s extraction of its most valuable natural resource—oil—which results in environmental harm and the disruption of Indigenous, communal life. The novel critiques the hazardous methods of crude oil exploitation, which put human health and life at risk. It demonstrates how uneven distribution of oil’s benefits sanctions corruption and fosters economic injustice, while all attempts at restoring justice are thwarted as much by local as by foreign culprits. The novel’s defense of traditional ways and the critique of Western modernity and capitalism encourage the search for grounds on which alternate epistemologies could be built. At the intersection of Western dominance and Indigenous response, the novel explores how local groups mobilize the visions of the past to oppose extractive projects. As the novel’s nostalgic title signals the happy times now bygone, its multigenerational interest brings modernity into focus. Finally, I argue that the novel’s memories of colonial extractive practices not only highlight the importance of resource temporalities around resource extraction but also emphasize their impact on the future of local communities.

Keywords: petrofiction, extractive neocolonialism, modernity, Africa.

The history of modernity is driven by access to energy. Not only has this resulted in urbanization and industrialization, but it continues to function as a mode of social difference and a source of social inequality. “Petromodernity” (LeMenager 71) or “petroculture” (Szeman 3) are the names given to a modern industrial society that is dependent on the production, consumption, and reproduction of oil. Consumer-oriented societies use petroleum not only in the production of motor fuels and lubricants, but also in plastic, pharmaceuticals, cosmetics, pesticides, and fertilizers. The international market’s demand for crude oil has had a destructive effect on the communities in which oil processing takes place. In fact, “[i]ndustrialized nations have been the world’s greatest consumers and generators of hazardous wastes” (Adeola 45), while “[o]il and gas companies are critical actors in the global debate on climate change and have played an important role in shaping much of the business—climate change discourse” (Levy 75). Negative environmental impacts of oil extraction contribute to global warming. Although Africa contributes about 3.7% of the emissions of global toxic greenhouse gases, compared with the USA’s 20% (Minter et al.), the devastating effects of climate change affect this continent unlike any other. As climate change is both a scientific and cultural phenomenon, the rise of environmentalist discourses, such as ecocriticism, has helped develop new environmental awareness based on the fact that petroleum cannot continue to be burned at the current rate without causing the earth’s climate to change in unpredictable ways.

Imbolo Mbue’s novel *How Beautiful We Were* (2021) explores transnational colonial-capitalist systems from an Indigenous perspective, demonstrating the persistence of colonial structures and their detrimental effect on the nation’s development. The novel addresses these issues through a four-generational story about a conflict between the residents of the fictional African village of Kosawa and an American oil company called Pexxon. When farmlands become infertile, children die from drinking of toxic water, and the repeated promises of clean-up and financial reparations fail to be delivered, the villagers seek help from their government and abroad. Pexxon embodies the threat of extractive neocolonialism in the form of a multinational corporation, which forever disrupts Kosawa’s communal way of life lived in close proximity to nature. The villagers try various schemes to get rid of Pexxon, while facing not only a powerful opponent but also the local corrupt elites that are conspiring with the foreign investors. Critiquing both local and Western culprits in brokering national economic development, the novel dramatizes the story in which oil is presented as “a harbinger of El Dorado and unprecedented wealth, avarice and power” (Watts 61).

Though the story unfolds in alternating points of view, the novel centers on the Nangi family, whose daughter Thula leads the campaign for justice. Through the portrayal of a female protagonist and her involvement in collective resistance, the novel acknowledges women's roles in fighting against petroviolence. The Africana and Religious Studies scholar Julian E. Kunnie identifies the power of women in spiritual and social practices of Indigenous societies to be one of the responses to the ecological and environmental crisis in Africa (437–43). This decades-spanning fight for agency and human dignity is set against the exploration of modern capitalism and the persistent consequences of the West's colonial legacy. Though the fight yields no winners, the novel reveals a complex relationship between the modern capital's inexorable drive for profit and the people who are not afraid to challenge the social and environmental costs of an oil-based economy.

As a collaborative means of addressing environmental and social problems, postcolonial ecocriticism explores ways in which we imagine and represent the relationship between humans and the environment. Read through this critical lens, Mbue's novel offers a "contrapuntal reading" (78), to use Said's words, of the story of oil imperialism, in which the USA manipulates and supports a dictatorial puppet government of fictional Kosawa in order to maintain control over its natural resources: "[I]hey all arrive here believing they have the power to take from us or give to us whatever will satisfy their endless wants" (Mbue 103). Attaining economic sovereignty for many postcolonial, developing nations—what Spivak calls the "worlding" of the Third World (92)—is still a work in progress, while local lives and lands are appropriated by foreign capital. Economic progress, however, is often beneficial only to the nation's ruling elite, and, as in the case of Mbue's novel, tied to economic injustice and environmental harm.

The Kosawa government's forcible management of natural resources can be viewed as a postcolonial version of ecological imperialism: "the forced march to industrialization" [which] has had disastrous cultural, as well as ecological effects" (Guha 196).¹ Projects such as the novel's fictional Pexton oil drilling company, which are subsidized by transnational, or in the case of the novel, American commercial interests, affect Kosawa in similar ways to other countries from the Global South by pushing them into economic bondage. This implementation is reflected in the concept of the neocolonialist "*iron triangle*, which defines the mutually-supportive influence, financial, and policy-making (and policy-*applying*) relationships

¹ Ramachandra Guha refers here to the Himalayan peasant antideforestation movement in the 1970s.

between the executive branch of government, the legislature, and special interest groups” (Adams 24, italics in the original). One such group is the Pexton crew, mostly workers brought in on short-term contracts, who live in gated compounds and “whose brothers and uncles and cousins and tribesmen worked in government offices” (Mbue 74). The American anthropologist James Ferguson observes that “the enclaves of mineral-extractive investment on the continent are normally tightly integrated with the head offices of multinational corporations and metropolitan centers, but sharply walled off from their own national societies (often literally walled, with bricks and razor wire)” (379). Such is the reality of the people of Kosawa, who are completely disconnected from oil production except for its toxic side-effects on their environment. Even though Pexton built the school, the clinic, and the meeting hall (Mbue 47), they are situated in the Gardens, the company’s gated community, and intended only for the employees and their families. The local people do not benefit from such enterprises, which are strictly exploitative and fail to bring any social investment.

With its focus on the uneven distribution of oil’s benefits and dire consequences to peoples and territories where it is found, Mbue’s novel represents “petrofiction,” the label coined by Amitav Ghosh in his review of Abdelraman Munif’s quintet of novels *Cities of Salt* in the March 1992 issue of *The New Republic*. Graeme Macdonald uses another term: “oil fiction,” defining the genre as “contain[ing] certain thematic preoccupations: volatile labor relations and ethnic tensions, war and violence, ecological despoliation, and political corruption” (31). Both labels form part of ecocritical studies, allowing us to focus on the nuanced conflicts in the novel between Pexton, which embodies Big Oil business, and the company men with the corrupted local elite, represented by the village leader Woja Beki: “We knew he was one of them . . . Pexton had bought his cooperation and he had, in turn, sold our future to them” (Mbue 5). As a cosmopolitan form of intellectual activism, petrofiction brings into focus issues that appear less compelling to more traditional forms of literary criticism. Situating the novel in an ecocritical frame validates the attempt of petrofiction to tell a complex political story that stretches beyond the initial oil encounter in order to demonstrate the broader geography of petromodernity, one that sharpens our sense of both the spatial and temporal dimensions of environmental crisis.

The first paragraph of the novel introduces the actors of the conflicts: “us”—the people of Kosawa, who are the victims, and “them”—“the men from Pexton” (4), who are the perpetrators, with the foreign business and the corrupt local government in the background. To further the binary opposition, a stereotypical portrayal of an African village, where barefoot

children fetch water from a well and chase “goats and chickens around into bamboo barns” (3), is juxtaposed with the symbols of the affluent, western world: “fine suits and polished shoes” (3), “briefcases” (4), “the hilltop mansion of the American overseer” (33)—the emblems of male corporate dominance. The image of a poor, rural village contrasted with the attributes of modern capitalism highlights not only an economic but also a culture gap between the two worlds. The hostility between the two groups is accentuated by the use of loaded language, such as “liars, savages, unscrupulous, evil” (3), and reflected in the narrator’s blatant hostility: “We should have cursed their mothers and their grandmothers, flung pejoratives upon their fathers, prayed for unspeakable calamities to befall their children. We hated them” (3). However, the initial binary is later deconstructed by the narrative employment of the villagers’, not the Pexton men’s, point of view, evincing ultimately that “them” is a complex amalgam of foreign interests, corrupt locals, and clueless African workers who are just as much victims as the “we,” who fight against and also collaborate with the foreign investors.

In line with the “oil fiction” genre, social injustice and corruption are presented as the main forces behind the conflict in the country, with oil revenue accounting for the most of the government income. The petroleum industry is presented as the only large employer other than public administration, hence social and environmental concerns are ignored in favor of financial returns in what Appel calls “a modular capitalist project, in which disentanglement from and thinning of liability for local conditions is intentional, always incomplete, and, in fact, requires sticky entanglements with local people and environment” (706). Everyone in Kosawa knows that “Pexton has been paying off people in the district office to shut their eyes” (Mbue 38). Michael Klare’s rhetorical question corresponds with Mbue’s plot: “And what do Africans get out all of this? Except for thousands of holes in the ground, various large-scale environmental catastrophes, and a scattering of heavily guarded villas and Swiss bank accounts for well-connected elites, not very much” (174). Kosawa’s story is dramatized as a harbinger of a world to come, in which, at least some of the villagers’ descendants may enjoy the benefits of modern urban life, whereas the majority will continue to suffer from the detrimental effects of colonial exploitation. The ensuing erosion of the Indigenous way of life, moreover, complicates the meaning of progress and highlights nostalgia for the world “in which [their] spirits were whole” (Mbue 359).

Aside from the investigation of the human costs of colonial exploitation, Mbue’s novel queries the relationship between literary imagination and the physical world thereby developing new modes of representation at the intersection of environment and culture. By “offering

the aesthetic experience of congruence between the human imagination and the physical environment, [it] enables the submersion of the reader not just into the text, but also into the world it represents” (O’Brien 145). The fictional world of Kosawa is portrayed through the images of toxified spaces, places, and bodies, what Lawrence Buell calls “toxic discourse.” Three major aspects of toxic discourse enumerated by Buell can be found in Mbue’s narrative: a contaminated or disrupted pastoral vision, images of total pollution, and a “David-versus-Goliath” fight of the oppressed against the oppressors (647–51). James Phelan highlights the importance of the mimetic component, which involves an audience’s interest in the characters as possible people and in the narrative world as like our own (5). One of the focal points in the novel is the mimetic representation of the violence of resource extraction, as exploration and exploitation of oil reserves are regarded as two of the most destructive activities to the environment, which involve deforestation and the installation of drilling equipment and pipelines: “[W]hatever life was left in the big river disappeared . . . The smell of Kosawa became the smell of crude. The noise from the oil field multiplied; day and night we heard it in our bedrooms, in our classroom, in the forest. Our air turned heavy” (Mbue 32). Disruption of soil structure causes erosion, which harms local flora and fauna, while the toxic waste contaminates surface and groundwater, robbing the community of the source of drinking water: “When the sky began to pour acid and rivers began to turn green, we should have known our land would soon be dead” (3). Repeated oil spills contaminate rivers, which contributes to reduced fish stock for consumption and sale. Broken pipelines flood the fields, which become no longer arable, or cause fires that destroy farms. As ecocriticism locates the text in the world, the world of Kosawa is presented as the epitome of human devastation of nature.

It is not only the disturbing images of environmental pollution that the story highlights, but also the vulnerability of the local population that is exposed to its hazards. Diseases that surreptitiously plague the villagers form an embodied means of witnessing “slow violence,” to use Rob Nixon’s concept. Some children develop “rashes and fevers” (8), and others, like Wambi, suffer from a cough: “When the cough hit, his eyes watered, his back hunched out, he had to hold on to something to steady himself” (7–8). Night and day gas flares release toxic chemicals, which are responsible for respiratory problems. Since the combustion of petroleum products is carcinogenic, increased cancer rates are observed: “We remembered those who had died from diseases with neither names nor cures—our siblings and cousins and friends who had perished from the poison in the water and the poison in the air and the poisoned food

growing from the land that lost its purity the day Pexton came drilling” (5). The health risks from chemical exposure are evident “[w]hen we began to wobble and stagger, tumbling and snapping like feeble little branches” (3), but the harm will have a lasting effect on “the farms that might not be fruitful . . . [and] the children who [will never get] a chance to grow up” (139). As economist Emmanuel U. Nnadozie writes about oil production in Africa more generally, it is also true for the people of Kosawa that “the discovery of oil is a curse that means only poverty, hunger, disease, suffering, deprivation, and exploration” (75).

Mbue’s novel critiques the hazardous methods of crude oil exploitation, which not only degrade the natural environment but also put human health and life at risk.² Oil is used as a trope for blurring the boundaries between environment and body, as both are equally exposed to its harm. In this way the narrative highlights their interconnectivity and mutual importance. The textual and visual significance of the disturbing images of an environmental disaster and human vulnerability lies not only in their emotional appeal, thereby showing the disastrous consequences of unsustainable development, but also in sensitizing the audience to the position of the countries that are dependent on mineral extraction for the principal source of revenue. However, it is not only a vivid landscape of destruction and loss of the natural habitat but also the erosion of local customs and practices caused by Pexton’s arrival that the novel demonstrates. It challenges Western realist representation when it relates to African cosmology in the description of rituals and ceremonies. Embodied in African spirituality and experience, Mbue’s narrative is intrinsically communal and manifests strong bonds between family members, as opposed to the individualism of Western art. In this way, the form of the story itself constitutes a practice of resistance against Western, anthropocentric paradigms of knowledge that are centered around the objectification, control, and domination of non/human nature.

Foreign capital’s mining of natural resources and ensuing environmental degradation often result in the removal and persecution of frontline Indigenous communities: “[W]hile Indigenous peoples are only 5% of the world population . . . they are involved in 40% of all environmental conflicts globally” (Alier and Meynen). As the story of Kosawa shows, Indigenous populations are disadvantaged by the conflict over control

² Compare the discussion of M. Watts and E. Kashi’s multimedia project *Curse of the Black Gold: 50 Years of Oil in the Niger Delta* as an ecology of suffering and as a site of trauma in Cajetan Iheka’s “Ecologies of Oil and Trauma of the Future in Curse of the Black Gold” (2020).

of oil resources, and their concerns impacted by extractive regimes are pushed to the margins. When extractive projects, such as Pexton, enlist the power of the corrupt state to advance their neo-colonial ideology, what Segun Gbadegesin calls “toxic terrorism” (191), the consequences of their activities extend across multiple generations. Stripped of mineral rights, the people of Kosawa are deprived of the benefits from oil revenues and unable to obtain adequate compensation for the environmental degradation of their land, while their non-formal, Indigenous expertise is ignored, and the “ways of knowing the world and knowing the self . . . are trivialized and invalidated by Western scientists and experts” (Briggs and Sharp 664). Thom Davies finds this pattern “repeated the world over, [when] environmental risks are commonly placed in the path of least resistance, near communities with the smallest reserves of political, economic, and social capital” (416).

Rob Nixon considers the work of conveying such prolonged environmental impacts on Indigenous communities to be one of the main “challenges posed by slow violence” (2).³ As Nixon explains, social inequality and discrimination form the foundation on which slow violence is built: “[I]hose people lacking resources [become] the principal casualties of slow violence” (4). However, it is not only the physical damage but also psychological toll of the ubiquitous death that slow violence communicates: “We hated that we went to bed in fear and woke up in fear, all day long breathed fear in and out” (Mbue 9). Slow violence is disguised in futile promises, such as the one that “drilling for oil would bring something called ‘civilization’ to our village . . . a wonderful thing called ‘prosperity’” (73), assuring that “our grandparents would be in awe of what a beautiful life they offer” (73). It is not only responsible for social harms but it gestures to uneven structures of power that allow such injustices to appear and continue. By bringing attention to the ways in which environmental degradation and hazards affect poor people of colour, Mbue’s novel responds to Cheryll Glotfelty’s appeal: “Where are the other voices?” (xxv).

Davies expands Nixon’s characteristic of slow violence being “out of sight,” by posing a crucial question: “[O]ut of sight to whom?” (414). “In asking this question,” he adds, “and taking seriously the knowledge claims of communities who live in toxic spaces, we can begin to unravel the power structures and politics that sustain the uneven geographies of pollution” (414). Mbue’s narrative provides an answer to Davies’s question,

³ Nixon defines “slow violence” as “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (2).

gesturing at local and foreign culprits who share the same desire for profit and disregard for moral authority: “They said all they ever did was pay the government for the right to drill our land—why should they be responsible for our government’s incompetence?” (136). As Davies concludes: “[S]low violence persists because those ‘arresting stories’ do not *count*. Crucially, a politics of *indifference* about the suffering of marginalized groups helps to sustain environmental injustice, allowing local claims of toxic harm to be silenced” (421, italics in the original). Literature, however, is one of the ways in which these concerns may be voiced within a broader scope, thereby familiarizing the global audience with environmental problems by allowing to empathetically imagine the lives of socially marginal people, such as the residents of Kosawa. The novel’s environmentally-framed social critique not only humanizes the people displaced by oil extraction but makes them visible by putting them within a concrete framework of place and time. In fact, a sense of compassion, with which the author foregrounds Indigenous worldviews and spirituality, is a unique feature of the novel. Mbue’s narrative represents the spiritual not only as real but also as realistic. For example, the twins, who act as the “village medium and medicine man” (27), and the laws of the Spirit have guided the people of Kosawa in maintaining these relationships in a respectful way, so as not to upset the holistic balance. An Indigenous worldview is presented as conducive to living in harmony with the universe, and as such should be honored for its integrity. Thus, the narrative convergence of the real and spiritual promotes an Indigenous perspective, which is deemed authentic and complementary.

The author escapes ethnocentricity by locating Kosawa’s problem in a transnational context. For example, the novel acknowledges that similar ecological problems are to be found in the US, where Native American communities resist the pipelines that “deprive their land of its sanctity” (207).⁴ In another reference to Native American history, the narrative evokes the infamous white settler-state policies towards Indigenous communities, which resulted in their marginalization and annihilation: “Across America today are pockets of people who were made prisoners on their land. The land of their ancestors was taken from them, and now they live at the edge of society” (213). There are stories about a place in the US “where children are drinking poisoned water” (207),⁵ and “where

⁴ See Nick Estes’s *Our History is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (2019), in which the author tells the story of northern Plains peoples, providing context for contemporary struggles.

⁵ See Laura Pulido’s article “Flint, Environmental Racism, and Racial Capitalism” (2016), in which she discusses the poisoning of water supply in Flint, Michigan as an example of environmental racism and the everyday functioning of racial capitalism.

land is disappearing into the sea” (207) due to oil extraction. When Thula Nangi, the Kosawa character who serves as the narrative center of the novel, comes to America on a scholarship, she sees it as an opportunity to learn more about the ways to help her people fight for social justice. Seeing the same harm done to others, she demonstrates the awakening of a global environmental awareness: “But now that I live here I’m realizing that something far more complex is going on all over the world, something that binds us to these beset Americans and others like us in villages and town and cities in nations big and small” (208). In this way, the story about a small African village gains importance as it becomes a parable of colonial and postcolonial domination and the eradication of traditional lifeways, as well as environments.

204

Bringing literary discourse into a relationship with the world, a story about a fictitious Kosawa finds its parallel in African history, when, “[i]n the early colonial period, in particular, private companies with their own private armies (from King Leopold’s Congo to the British South Africa Company) long ago pioneered methods for securing economic extraction in the absence of modern state institutions” (Ferguson 380). Grandmother Yaya’s recollections reclaim the colonial past by re-telling the story through an Indigenous voice, which uses irony as a strategy of resistance and subversion. The woman evokes the tragic history of the African continent, which started with the European explorers who “had traveled here to understand what kind of people we were, why we behaved the way we did, how they could help us so we could live better lives” (Mbue 217). Then, others came “to tell us about their Spirit. They said their Spirit would bring us out of the darkness we didn’t know we were living in. We would see the light” (219). Even though “Kosawa was spared when men began arriving from the coast looking for humans to snatch and sell,” they welcomed groups “of escapees presenting stories of villages emptied out by snatchers” (221). “Nowadays young people talk about the oil as if it’s our first misfortune; they forget that, long before the oil, the parents of our parents suffered for the sake of rubber” (222), says Yaya, referring to the Western demand for natural rubber that resulted in forced labor in colonial Africa: “If a man fled without delivering his quota of rubber, the interpreters came for his family. Children were pulled from their huts and beaten in village squares because their fathers had escaped the rubber plantations. Wives were raped. Mothers punched. No one was spared” (223). Finally, before “the masters had decided to return to Europe” (224), they set up the government, picking the president whose sudden death they engineered “after they decided he wasn’t an obedient servant” (225). His Excellency, the new President, follows in the footsteps of the colonial rulers, and “the day he ascended to the top in Bézam, this

country became his property. From it he harvests whatever pleases him and destroys whoever displeases him” (226). With his nominal sovereignty and economic dependence on foreign capital, His Excellency gives the Kosawa land to Pexton. By bringing colonial history to the conversation, the author highlights its persistent relevance. Kosawa’s story is thus presented, Mbue argues, not as an exception but as a continuation of a systemic violence perpetrated against this region.

African raw materials, such as rubber and oil, and local export market economies have long been subordinated to the interests of the Western capital. In fact, with the continuing demand for rubber, the only change has been in a technological process, as “[m]ore than half the world’s rubber now comes not from weeping wood but gushing oil” (Harford). Yaya’s memories highlight the destructive impact of the policies of colonialism that impeded African economic development and created a reliance on imported goods. The infrastructure that developed, especially in its executive capacity, was designed to exploit the natural resources and bring profit to the privileged minority, local and foreign. Kunnie also finds the roots of ecological devastation of the African continent in the past:

The holocaust of chattel enslavement of Africans followed by colonialist conquest and occupation is what precipitated the ecological crisis in Africa, particularly through the introduction of deep mineral mining and extraction of vital resources along with erasure of forests, trees, and underbrush through military invasions and incursions into the hinterlands of Africa from coastal lines, particularly in West Africa and Southwestern (426).

Yaya’s story demonstrates that the problems described in the novel do not result from the present-day political and economic challenges, but are deeply rooted in Africa’s colonial past.

The author escapes the frames of Africa’s postcolonial victimhood by signaling the ways of resistance on the part of local community. The narrative offers alternative scenarios that could reconstruct the world of Kosawa and seek justice for its residents. However Mbue consequently avoids binary systematizing, by showing no consensus among the villagers about how to proceed. Some look for solutions inside the country, like the village leader Woja Beki, who encourages the people to wait and trust Pexton to do the right thing, or Thula’s brother Juba, who “got into the sole government leadership school in the country,” hoping one day to form “a government made of people like us, those who had suffered the consequences of bad policies and knew how things ought to be”

(Mbue 334). Nonviolent ways are promoted by 'The Movement for the Restoration of the Dignity of Subjugated Peoples, which recommends "talking about how we can peacefully bring about change with dialogue, negotiation, common ground, more dialogue" (207). There are those who decide to take matters into their own hands, such as Thula's father Malabo, and disappear without a trace. Others rely on American activists, such as Austin, who "believes in dialogue, in people sharing their stories, hearing others' stories, enemies gaining new perspectives on each other" (275). Domestic revolutionaries, such as Thula, use a grassroots movement to motivate the community members to take responsibility for their country, teaching "her students things the government didn't wish its future leaders to be taught" (343). None of the attempts to seek justice is given textual prominence, nor are the protagonists portrayed only as heroes or villains, as all efforts are presented as important, even if not equally effective.

As the story unfolds, however, nothing the protestors do poses a real challenge to Pexnton, which uses the hypocrisy of corporate double-speak, claiming that "Kosawa was spreading lies about Pexnton and, in the process, hurting His Excellency's image" (172). Juba's first days of work as a civil servant leave him no hope of eradicating corruption: "Repeatedly, I was told my job was to clean up numbers, not to ask questions about why large sums of money could not be accounted for" (335), so he jumps on the bandwagon and amasses "riches from payoffs" (337). Austin no longer fools himself "that a story he's written may entice his countrymen to reconsider their ways of thinking and being" (274). When Thula's plea loses in an American court, she knows they have lost, as "[f]iling a lawsuit against the government and Pexnton in a Bézam court would be ludicrous" (344). Finally, she meets her death together with the Five, a militant group she has helped to set up, during a failed kidnapping of the Pexnton executive.

Oil discourse is co-extensive with the social, and Mbue's narrative brings these two domains of inquiry into dialogue, while blurring the lines between victims and perpetrators, between those who want to fight the American corporation or take their money. "[Y]ou'll see that the ones who came to kill us and the ones who'll run to save us are the same" (103), prophesizes Konga, one of the villagers. And indeed the novel gradually deconstructs the stark binarism which is set up in the first paragraph, ultimately showing how some of the villagers become murderers while the Pexnton workers are revealed as victims of circumstance. Even the corrupt elites have reasons for their cynicism, rooted in their own trauma and dislocation.

Mbue's novel provides a compelling portrait of colonial exploitation, in which a "global system of hyper-capitalism is transgressing key planetary

ecological boundaries” (Dawson and Amatya 3). This representation of an ecological crisis does not imagine an alternative future other than the destructive petroculture: “[O]n all sides the dead were too many—on the side of the vanquished, on the side of the victors, on the side of those who’d never chosen sides” (Mbue 340). It gestures at the past while questioning the very foundation of the African countries: “We were different tribes thrown together with no common dream. We were forced to build upon sinking sand, and now we’re crumbling from within” (335), and at the present, arguing that “[o]il violence is generated by the evil twins of authoritarian governmentality and petro-capitalism” (Watts 62), fueled by lack of transparency and accountability. Demonstrating the devastating consequences of the processes of industrial resource extraction, it imagines the future, as the downfall of Kosawa allows to reflect on the future of many vulnerable developing countries.

The story about a small African village goes beyond a focus on oil extraction to question the terms of the struggle between Indigeneity and modernity. As there is no retreat from encroaching modernity, its impact on the children of Kosawa eludes easy classification. Even if the children of the village are compensated by scholarships and personal wealth, this triumph of modernity entails the destruction of their unique cultural heritage. The vanishing of a traditional way of life erodes their basis for self-identification and robs them of communal support. Invoking the imagery of the traditional Indigenous lifeways of Kosawa not as backward and primitive but rather as their own legitimate world, rich in mutual responsiveness and care, the author questions the worth of the gains of Western modernity. The irony is that the novel acknowledges the importance of education; the heroine, Thula, craves Western education and benefits from it, just as the author herself is an educated woman. The narrative, however, refuses to conclude that the modern Western life is better than the traditional life of the villagers. One can grieve for Kosawa and lament the futile struggles of its people, or be inspired by their determination and resistance. But the dignity and respect with which the narrative posits the acceptance of the passing of time and the changes that inevitably come with it make the story truly poignant, and even elegiac. What else is there left for people involuntarily locked in a struggle between Indigeneity and modernity if not memory and nostalgia, the title seems to suggest.

 WORKS CITED

Adams, Gordon. *The Iron Triangle: The Politics of Defense Contracting*. Council on Economic Priorities, 1981.

- Adeola, Francis O. "Environmental Injustices and Human Rights Abuse: The States, MNCs, and Repression of Minority Groups in the World System." *Human Ecology Review*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2001, pp. 39–59.
- Alier, Joan Martinez, and Nick Meynen. "Never-Ending Growth?" *Common Dreams*, 29 July 2019, <https://www.commondreams.org/views/2019/07/29/never-ending-growth>, accessed 10 June 2021.
- Appel, Hannah. "Offshore Work: Oil, Modularity, and the How of Capitalism in Equatorial Guinea." *American Ethnologist*, vol. 39, no. 4, 2012, pp. 692–709. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1425.2012.01389>
- Briggs, John, and Joanne Sharp. "Indigenous Knowledges and Development: A Postcolonial Caution." *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 25, no. 4, 2004, pp. 661–76. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436590410001678915>
- Buell, Lawrence. "Toxic Discourse." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 24, no. 3, 1998, pp. 639–65. <https://doi.org/10.1086/448889>
- Davies, Thom. "Slow Violence and Toxic Geographies: 'Out of Sight' to Whom?" *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2022, 409–27. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F2399654419841063>
- Dawson, Ashley, and Alok Amatya. "Literature in an Age of Extraction: An Introduction." *MFS*, vol. 66, no. 1, 2020, pp. 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2020.0000>
- Estes, Nick. *Our History is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance*. Verso, 2019.
- Ferguson, James. "Seeing like an Oil Company: Space, Security, and Global Capital in Neoliberal Africa." *American Anthropologist*, vol. 107, no. 3, 2005, pp. 377–82. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.2005.107.3.377>
- Gbadegesin, Segun. "Multinational Corporations, Developed Nations, and Environmental Racism: Toxic Waste, Exploration, and Eco-Catastrophe." *Faces of Environmental Racism: Confronting Issues of Global Justice*, edited by Laura Westra and Bill E. Lawson, Rowman & Littlefield, 2001, pp. 187–201.
- Ghosh, Amitav. "Petrofiction." *The New Republic*, 2 Mar. 1992, pp. 29–33.
- Glotfelty, Cheryll. Introduction. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, U of Georgia P, 1996, pp. xv–xxxvii.
- Guha, Ramachandra. *The Unquiet Woods: Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Himalayas*. U of California P, 2000.
- Harford, Tim. "The Horrific Consequences of Rubber's Toxic Past." *BBC*, 24 July 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-48533964>, accessed 21 June 2021.
- Iheka, Cajetan. "Ecologies of Oil and Trauma of the Future in Curse of the Black Gold." *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2020, pp. 69–91. <https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2019.29>

- Klare, Michael. *Rising Powers, Shrinking Planet: The New Geopolitics of Energy*. Holt Paperbacks, 2008.
- Kunnie, Julian E. "Restoring Africa's Heartland: Earth, Women, Culture, and Community." *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 44, no. 4, 2013, pp. 426–48. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934713489880>
- LeMenager, Stephanie. *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century*. Oxford UP, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199899425.001.0001>
- Levy, David L. "Business and the Evolution of the Climate Regime." *The Business of Global Environmental Governance*, edited by David L. Levy and Peter J. Newell, MIT P, 2005, pp. 73–104.
- Macdonald, Graeme. "Oil and World Literature." *American Book Review*, vol. 33, no. 3, 2012, pp. 7–31. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199899425.001.0001>
- Mbue, Imbolo. *How Beautiful We Were*. Random, 2021.
- Minter, William, Anita Wheeler, and Emira Woods. "Climate Change and Africa's Natural Resources." *Institute for Policy Studies*, https://ipsdc.org/climate_change_and_africas_natural_resources, accessed 10 Jan. 2021.
- Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard UP, 2011. <https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674061194>
- Nnadozie, Emmanuel U. *Oil and Socioeconomic Crisis in Nigeria: A Regional Perspective to the Nigerian Disease and The Rural Sector*. Mellen UP, 1995.
- O'Brien, Susie. "Articulating a World of Difference: Ecocriticism, Postcolonialism and Globalization." *Canadian Literature*, vol. 170/171, 2001, pp. 140–58.
- Phelan, James. *Experiencing Fiction: Judgments, Progressions, and the Rhetorical Theory of Narrative*. Ohio State UP, 2007.
- Pulido, Laura. "Flint, Environmental Racism, and Racial Capitalism." *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, vol. 27, no. 3, 2016, pp. 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10455752.2016.1213013>
- Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. Vintage, 1993.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. Methuen, 1987.
- Szeman, Imre. "Introduction to Focus: Petrofictions." *American Book Review*, vol. 33, no. 3, March–April 2012, p. 3.
- Watts, Michael. "Resource Curse? Governmentality, Oil and Power in the Niger Delta, Nigeria." *Geopolitics*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2004, pp. 50–80. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650040412331307832>

Brygida Gasztold (PhD, D.Litt.) holds an MA degree, a Doctorate degree, and D.Litt. from Gdańsk University, and a diploma of postgraduate studies in British Studies from Ruskin College, Oxford, and Warsaw University. She was the recipient of a 2013–14 Fulbright Senior Research Award. She is Associate Professor at Koszalin University of Technology, Poland. Her academic interests include contemporary ethnic American literatures, American Jewish literature, Native American literature, as well as the problems of immigration, gender, and ethnic identities.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1985-1713>

brygida.gasztold@tu.koszalin.pl